THE PLACE OF HUMANISM IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Humanism is primarily a movement which places concern for human flourishing and happiness as a primary moral goal. It has functioned historically as a critique of unjust, repressive, and inegalitarian practices, and as an insistence that we should have regard for all human beings, their well-being and fulfilment. At its best, it extends this regard for fulfilment and well-being beyond the human, to include all sentient life.

It typically claims that such a morality can exist without any religious beliefs, and that is certainly true. But it is also true that it can and should exist within religious forms of life, both as a critique of practices that curtail human freedom, equality, and dignity, and as an ideal goal of religious life.

In contemporary Britain, however, a form of secular humanism has arisen, which regards religious beliefs as irrational and unevidenced, and thus regards them with disfavour. In fact the British Humanist Association is explicitly non-religious – a view which seems to exclude quite a few rational people from an otherwise appealing association. If there is to be freedom of belief, it seems desirable that there should be informed reflection of what religious beliefs amount to, in order to make a reasoned choice possible, and that is what religious studies does.

There are various form of secular humanism, and I shall take Stephen Law's excellent little book on humanism, which equates humanism with secular humanism, as my guide. My

account falls under four headings – epistemology, ontology, ethics, and politics.

Stephen Law suggests that humanism has a specific **epistemology**, which he describes by saying that knowledge should be based on 'science and reason'. He does not stress the most important basis of knowledge, which is experience, both sensory and subjective (experience of feelings, thoughts, and intentions). I suspect that this is because once you take experience seriously, you may be in danger of including such things as experience of a non-sensory reality, and that begins to suggest some forms of religion.

Humanism also has an **ontology**. According to secular humanism, the list of things which exist excludes any and all 'supernatural' agents which might be experienced. This form of humanism is committed to the non-existence of any non-physical conscious beings, which, it holds, would be irrelevant to morality anyway. I am not sure about this. Many religions are very concerned with human flourishing, but assert that it is to be found precisely by conscious relation to a valuable spiritual reality, which alone makes such flourishing possible, for many people and perhaps for everyone. Humanists must claim that human flourishing is possible, even though there are no higher powers that could guarantee that. In my view, that is a totally unrealistic claim for the vast majority of humans, whose lives are too short and miserable to make flourishing a possibility. There would be no life beyond physical death which might allow final

fulfilment to be realised. Still, it might be an ideal goal, however unrealistic.

The epistemology and ontology of humanism should naturally be treated when discussing religious views of what human flourishing is and how it could be realised. When discussing how God might be known, or the 'proofs' of God, for instance, obviously sceptical views of such things should be covered, and they usually are. Humanism has nothing much to add here, since it is only making the already familiar negative claim that there are no spiritual beings.

Humanism, though, is mainly an **ethical** stance. There is, it claims, a morality that exists and is not based on any religion. That is clearly true. In fact, there is a range of what can be called 'naturalist' (non-religious and non-metaphysical) moralities, and the humanist view is one of them, and not perhaps the most important or obvious one.

I shall list four such naturalistic moral views, in what I think is their order of importance.

First, is Marxist communism. This by far the most important naturalist morality in today's world. It is a morality based on the fact of human conflict. Moral beliefs derive from economic factors (that is what 'materialism' means in this context), and class conflict is essential to moving towards the eventual withering away of the state. In the meantime we need the dictatorship of the workers. This view could be discussed if liberation theology is discussed, but it is far from the morality espoused by humanism.

Second is fascism, or right wing tyranny. Again the key is conflict – there is no such thing as the 'common good'; communities are more important than individuals; tyranny is needed to ensure security, because humans are inherently egoistic, nationalistic, and violent. Only a strong dictatorship, 'The Great Leviathan', can hold societies together, and they will always be at war with competing societies. This is not very like humanism either.

Third is moral pragmatism. Humans are accidental by-products of an evolutionary process that has largely been driven by lust and aggression, and we need not a morality of obligation, but a rational pragmatic means of surviving in a dangerous world. John Gray, in books like 'Straw Dogs', is the best advocate of this view, and he sees humanism as a contemptible and hopelessly idealistic relic of Christianity, with its talk of 'loving everyone, even enemies'. Why should we care about people we dislike, who want to destroy us? Humans are pack animals, and survive by ruthless competition. Things are never going to get any better, and we just have to choose the game strategy that will give our own group or species the best chance of survival. This is possibly the most favoured account of naturalist ethics in the UK today. It is fundamentally opposed to humanism.

Fourth is what has been called 'expansive naturalism', espoused by John McDowell, David Wiggins, and (in an earlier generation) Iris Murdoch. There are no gods (that is what naturalism comes down to), but there are objective and demanding moral values, which are parts of the natural

world. I do not know where they are supposed to exist, on a naturalist view, but Iris Murdoch supposed that ‘the Good’ is a real existent, though it has no causal power. This view is, though it has some supporters, getting dangerously near to some religious views.

Way down this list of naturalist accounts of ethics, perhaps in fifth place, comes the humanist claim that we ought to seek equality, justice, and happiness for everyone. This view has a very different account of human nature, which the first four views regard as dangerous, myopic, and violent, the unintended product of a ruthless contest for the survival of the fittest.

It also contains an internal tension. It tends to commend moral autonomy – deciding your moral principles for yourself - while at the same time assuming that there are universal human rights which everyone should accept. In other words, there are some moral values you are not free to reject. You cannot, however, have it both ways. If people are worse than you think, and they decide their moralities for themselves, they may well choose to be ‘free loaders’, and to take advantage of every else to obtain their own flourishing. The we may be in trouble. If there is no way that people objectively ‘ought’ to be, anarchy is never far away.

We may admire the ethical stance of humanism, but it is well down the list of naturalist moralities, and anyway it does not easily fit with an epistemology which only recognises ‘science and reason’, and normally does not speak of knowledge of moral values or truths.

The final element of humanism is the one that is really important to it in practice, the **political** programme of secularising society. It is hard to see how this could fit into a religion course, since it is opposed to the existence of all such courses. What it wants is the abolition of faith schools, the disestablishment of the C of E, the exclusion of religious leaders from parliament, and the freeing of the law from all religious considerations. I make no comment on these aims, except to say that discussion of them seems to belong in a course on politics. It would be very odd to find them in a course on religion.

In conclusion, humanism is a very good thing, and needs to be taught. Secular humanism, however (and that is what Humanist Societies now espouse) is a combination of a set of criticisms of religion; a plausible claim that there can be morality without religion; one, not the most important or coherent, of a set of naturalist moralities; and a political programme. It certainly has a place in a humane education, but it seems doubtful that it should be a main strand in a course on the better understanding of religion and theology.